

West Nile virus surveillance: What our community can do

Public Health – Seattle & King County is doing a great deal to prepare for the possible arrival of West Nile virus in King County. This fact sheet describes Public Health's surveillance program and how you can get involved.

Dead bird surveillance

The West Nile virus needs host birds and mosquitoes to survive. The virus can be passed from mosquito to bird or from bird to mosquito. At some point, an infected mosquito may bite another victim, like a horse or even a human being.

Though many birds and other animals may be infected by West Nile virus, some birds are particularly susceptible to the virus. Crows, jays and other "corvid" birds often sicken and die from West Nile virus. That's why Public Health is watching out for dead crows and why Public Health is testing them for West Nile virus. **When Public Health finds a dead crow with West Nile virus, King County will know the virus has arrived in our area.**

You can help! Call Public Health at 206-205-4394 if you find a dead crow in King County. The crow you find may be selected for testing for West Nile virus, though all dead crow reports will be tracked in the database. When you call, you will be asked a few questions. First, is the bird freshly dead (dead less than 24 hours)? Second, where and when did you find the dead bird? We will need to know the address where the bird was found. Third, is the bird undamaged? Only undamaged birds are suitable for testing. You may call Monday through Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Not all crows need to be tested for Public Health to effectively monitor for West Nile virus. In fact, we receive many more calls reporting dead crows than the laboratory can test. If the crow you find is not appropriate for testing, or if you find a dead bird that is not a crow, you may dispose of it in your garbage can. Public Health is tracking crow deaths, so even if the bird you find will not be tested, we are still interested in the information you provide.

Birds discovered on Friday and Saturday will not be tested and should be disposed of in the garbage. Using gloves or a shovel, double bag the bird in plastic bags and dispose of it in your garbage. Though dead birds will not transmit West Nile virus, you should not pick up a dead animal with your bare hands.

To help us learn more about West Nile virus, Public Health is tracking the deaths of birds other than crows, though we will not be picking these birds up for testing. The types of birds, in addition to crows, that may be affected by West Nile virus and we are interested in receiving reports on are: ravens, jays, magpies, and raptors (eagles, hawks, and owls). Call 206-205-4394 if you find one of these types of birds. You may call Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

The University of Washington is conducting a study on crows. If you find a crow with a colored band on its leg, you found one of the crows in the study. When you call Public Health to report the

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dead crow you found, please mention that it has a band on its leg. To learn more about the University of Washington's study, visit <http://www.urbanecology.washington.edu/Crows/westnile.htm>

Mosquito surveillance

Mosquitoes are the carriers for West Nile virus, which means that the virus depends on mosquitoes to spread the virus from one host bird to another. But not all mosquitoes are West Nile virus carriers. In fact, out of approximately 50 species of mosquitoes in Washington State, only a handful are known to be potential West Nile virus carriers.

In cooperation with the State Department of Health, Public Health is doing a mosquito surveillance study. Public Health is working with agencies and groups to collect samples of mosquito larvae from different parts of the county, in different habitats, in order to know what species of mosquito live here and their breeding conditions. The more knowledge Public Health has the better we are prepared to suggest strategies and control measures.

Public Health is tracking areas in King County that seem to have a mosquito problem. If there is a mosquito problem in your neighborhood, call Public Health to report it. Although we do not have the regulatory authority to require someone to get rid of mosquito breeding habitat on their property, we can offer advice and information. Staff will answer your call Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

What can be done to get rid of mosquitoes?

Mosquitoes are a natural part of our ecosystem, and they live in the same environment as human beings. You may wonder whether draining wetlands and swamps would be an appropriate step to take this habitat away from mosquitoes. King County has learned that such control measures may have serious negative consequences for our health and environment. For example, draining swamps and wetlands can hamper the water table from recharging, and in addition, wetlands play a critical role in filtering pollutants out of our water system. It is a trade-off that just doesn't make sense.

It does make sense to reduce mosquitoes where appropriate. Native fish, frogs, and other natural predators are an excellent means to reduce mosquito numbers. Where additional control measures are appropriate, one option under consideration is to use a natural larvicide to eliminate young insect before they become adults. Adult control is much less effective and requires using chemicals that can damage our health and environment. Adult mosquito control would only be used if there were a serious health emergency.

Reducing your risk of mosquito bites

Mosquitoes will always be in our environment, but there are things we can do to reduce their breeding habitats near our yards and homes. Remove habitat where possible, starting in the back yard. Get rid of standing water in buckets and other containers such as toys, watering cans, and other objects that hold water. Stop mosquitoes from getting in your home by putting up screens. Wear long pants and shirts, and consider using an insect repellent. Avoid spending time outdoors at prime biting hours – dusk and dawn. Please see Public Health's "[Reduce the bite](#)" fact sheet for more specific information.

West Nile virus is likely to arrive in King County in 2003. Public Health is preparing by monitoring bird deaths closely and by finding out what kind of mosquitoes are present in King County that can carry the disease. Public Health is also working with the medical community to monitor

illness. Public Health is also working with other local, county and state agencies on measures to reduce mosquito habitat and on strategies for mosquito control.

Please become involved by watching out for dead crows, and by reducing mosquito habitat in your own yard. Most of all, learn as much as you can about West Nile virus and know that it is unlikely to hurt you, even if you were bitten by an infected mosquito! For the latest information you may call our West Nile virus hotline: 206-205-3883. To report a dead crow for tracking and possible testing, to report another corvid or raptor for tracking purposes, or to report mosquito problems call 206-205-4394. If you are concerned about your health, please see your doctor or health care provider.